DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 388 040 FL 023 278

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TITLE Aboriginal English. PEN 93.
INSTITUTION Primary English Teaching Association, Newtown (Australia).
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Dialects; Child Development; Classroom Communication; Creoles; Cultural Differences; *Dialects; Elementary Education; English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Grammar; *Indigenous Populations; Phonology; Pragmatics; Semantics; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Australia; Australia (Torres Strait); Kriol

ABSTRACT

This report focuses on the teaching of English to Aboriginal children in primary schools in Australia. A definition and analysis of dialectal differences between Aboriginal (Australian) English and Standard (Australian) English is offered that includes the phonological, morpho-syntactic, lexico-semantic, and pragmatic differences of the Aboriginal English. Only since the 1960s has Aboriginal English been viewed not as uneducated English, but as a continuum of dialects that provide cultural identity maintenance in the Aboriginal community. Two Aboriginal creoles are also briefly discussed: Kriol and Torres Strait Creole. Respect and understanding of Aboriginal English is recommended to enhance the identity and self-esteem of Aboriginal children acquiring Standard Australian English. Implications for communication in the classroom and for education systems in Australia are discussed, including comparison to the acceptance and development of Black English as a dialect in its own right in American schools. (Contains 11 references.) (NAV)

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Aboriginal English

Diana Eades

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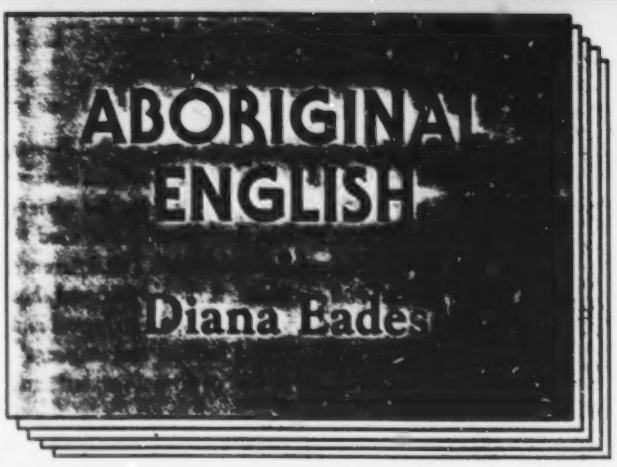

PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING ASSOCIATION

Appropriately, in the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples, this PEN focuses on a number of issues concerning Aboriginal children and English language teaching in primary schools — namely:

- **What English language skills and strengths do Aboriginal children bring to school?**
- **What are the English language needs of these children in our primary schools?**
- **In what ways is their English different from the English of other Australian primary school children?**
- **To what extent can these differences shed light on a variety of difficulties which teachers may experience in teaching Aboriginal children?**

In answering these questions, I shall offer an explanation of dialectal differences between Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English (referring to them by the abbreviations AE and SE respectively). Even if you are not teaching Aboriginal children, most of you will be teaching English and so are likely to be interested in finding out more about the linguistic diversity of Australian dialects of English.

WHAT ARE DIALECTAL DIFFERENCES?

Have you ever heard an Aboriginal person saying something like the following sentences?

This a 'ard one.
'E in 'ospital.

Speakers of SE would express these sentences differently:

This is a hard one.
He's in hospital. or *He is in hospital.*

The differences are small, and it is rare for a non-Aboriginal listener to be confused by such variations. However, the Aboriginal person's way of speaking is often considered to be 'bad English', 'lazy English' or 'incorrect English'; you might think that he or she has left out an important little word, or a part of a word or a sound.

That's an interesting reaction, because it's exactly what a speaker of Standard American English would think on hearing the SE versions. The Standard American English versions of these sentences would be:

This is a hard one.
He's in the hospital. or *He is in the hospital.*

Because SE speakers don't pronounce the r sound in the word *hard* and don't use the word *the* when talking about going to hospital in general, the SE versions will sound funny or incorrect to many speakers of American English.

These examples show us that little differences between ways of speaking English are often specific to a particular social or regional group. They are differences of dialect, and one of the tasks of linguists is to examine dialectal variation in different kinds of English all over the world.

It should be noted that the term *dialect* is used here in a neutral way, as it always is by linguists. It does not have pejorative connotations, and it does not refer to kinds of English that are without a literary tradition or are spoken by uneducated people. Rather it refers to different ways of saying the same thing which are shared by social or regional groups of people.

A dialect is a variety of language which:

- **can be understood by speakers of other varieties of the same language, and**
- **differs from other varieties of the same language in systematic ways (these differences can be found in sounds, grammar, words and their meanings, and language use).**

Australian dialects of English include Standard Australian English, Aboriginal English and non-standard Australian English. Examples of other dialects of English are Standard British English, Scottish English, Irish English, Standard American English and Black American English. Aboriginal English, like the other dialects of English, is not the same over all the region in which it is spoken; in other words, there are regional differences.

Standard English (whether Australian, British or American) has no linguistic status or characteristic which separates it from all of the other dialects of English. It is simply the dialect of English which is spoken by the more powerful, dominant groups in society, and which has therefore become the language of education, the media,

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government and the law. Or, as Trudgill (1983, p. 17) puts it:

> *Standard English is that variety of English which is usually used in print, and which is normally taught in schools and to non-native speakers learning the language. It is also the variety which is normally spoken by educated people, and used in news broadcasts and other similar situations. The difference between standard and non-standard, it should be noted, has nothing in principle to do with differences between formal and colloquial language, or with concepts such as 'bad language'. Standard English has colloquial as well as formal variants, and standard English speakers swear as much as others.*

WHAT IS ABORIGINAL ENGLISH?

Aboriginal English is the name given to dialects of English which are spoken by Aboriginal people and which differ from Standard Australian English in systematic ways.

The historical development of Aboriginal English is fascinating because it demonstrates how Aboriginal people have adapted their ways of communicating to English. It is impossible to give more than a simplified summary of the development here, but interested readers are referred to Malcolm and Kaldor (1991).

It seems that there were about 250 languages spoken in this country before the British invasion, with at least 600 distinct dialects. The differences between neighbouring languages were often similar to the differences between, say, English and Spanish. And the languages were complex, with the 'easy' ones matching Latin in their complexity!

The great majority of the invaders were reluctant to learn any of the Aboriginal languages. So, from the time of their first contacts with the British, Aboriginal people began to use some English in their dealings with them (Troy 1993). With Aboriginal and British people trying to communicate with each other in English, a simplified kind of language developed, used only between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in situations of limited contact. This kind of English is referred to as *pidgin English*.

Within a few generations this pidgin began to develop an important communicative function between different Aboriginal groups who did not have a shared traditional language, and so it expanded linguistically. The social and linguistic development of early pidgin gave birth to Aboriginal dialects of English all over the country, as well as to two creole languages in some northern areas.

In some areas, however, it appears that Aboriginal English developed not from pidgin English but from the Aboriginalisation of English as speakers learnt the language. In other words, Aboriginal people in areas where there was no pidgin language made English into an Aboriginal English by bringing into it accents, grammar and ways of speaking from their traditional languages.

It should be noted that it is linguistically inaccurate and derogatory to use the term 'pidgin English' to refer to the kinds of English spoken by Aboriginal people today.

While most of the rest of this PEN is about Aboriginal dialects of English, a brief account of the creole languages mentioned above is included at the end. A creole language is a type of language which develops when a pidgin language expands its structures and functions to become the first language of speakers, not just a language of contact between people who do not share the same first language. To distinguish the Aboriginal creole from other creoles which have arisen in similar circumstances in other parts of the world, it has been given the distinctive name 'Kriol'.

BUT ISN'T IT JUST UNEDUCATED ENGLISH?

To people not trained in linguistic and sociolinguistic analysis, it might appear that Aboriginal English is simply an uneducated variety of English. However, this would be an erroneous assumption, for while there are a number of features (particularly grammatical features) which AE shares with other non-standard varieties of English, there are many others which are distinctively Aboriginal. These features testify to the fact that Aboriginal ways of using language and communicating have survived and remained strong — despite the extinction of traditional languages all over the continent. (It is estimated that of the original 250 Aboriginal languages, only about 90 survive in any form, and only 20 of these are in a 'relatively healthy state' [Schmidt 1990].)

IS IT THE SAME ALL OVER AUSTRALIA?

It would be an oversimplification to speak of one dialect of AE, just as it would be to speak of one dialect of British English (one has only to think of the differences in grammar, sound systems, and vocabulary between Cockney and 'Geordie' English). There are a number of AE dialects, or, more accurately, there is a continuum of AE dialects, ranging from close to SE at one extreme to close to Kriol at the other. Increasingly the terms 'light' and 'heavy' are being used to refer to these extremes. Heavy AE is spoken mainly in the more remote areas, where it is influenced by Kriol, while light varieties of AE are spoken mainly in metropolitan, urban and rural areas.

AE is spoken throughout Australia, as either the first or second language of the great majority of Aboriginal people. It is thought to be the first language of most Aboriginal people in the areas where traditional languages and Kriol are not spoken. While there have been some studies of AE in Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory, there are still many areas, including notably the Torres Strait Islands, about which little detail is available.

Just as in pre-contact times Aboriginal people spoke a number of languages and dialects, contemporary speakers of AE are often bilingual or bidialectal. In the more remote areas many Aboriginal people speak AE in interactions with non-Aboriginals, and Kriol or traditional languages in interactions with other Aboriginal people. In the less remote areas many speak a light AE, or even SE, in interactions with non-Aboriginals, and a heavier AE in Aboriginal interactions. Thus non-Aboriginals who have dealings with

Aboriginal people in official domains, such as employment or education, may not always encounter their use of Aboriginal varieties of English.

For the same reason it would be wrong to assume that Aboriginal spokespeople or leaders with a high profile in mainstream society are not AE speakers. Frequently they are people who can choose the variety of English which best suits their purpose. Like bilingual speakers, they can use their linguistic and communicative skills to participate effectively both in their own communities and in mainstream society.

ABORIGINAL ENGLISH AND IDENTITY

Aboriginal English plays an important role in the maintenance and assertion of Aboriginal identity. As the linguistic situation before the British invasion shows, Aboriginal people have long used language and speech as markers of group identity. I have already remarked that Aboriginal ways of communicating remain strong, and AE signals Aboriginality in many subtle ways.

The accent, vocabulary and grammatical patterns of AE enable Aboriginal people from all over the country to recognise other Aboriginal people, even in contexts where visible markers of identity are not present. Moreover, distinctively Aboriginal ways of using English (such as the indirectness discussed below) give Aboriginal people a feeling of being comfortable with each other, and a rich non-verbal communication system is widely used as well.

FEATURES OF ABORIGINAL ENGLISH

If we are we going to understand the language skills which Aboriginal children bring to school, as well as their English language needs, then we need to understand how AE differs from SE. Differences are found in all aspects of language: i.e. phonology (or accent and pronunciation), morpho-syntax (or grammar), lexico-semantics (or words and their meaning), and pragmatics (or the way that language is used in socio-cultural contexts). Examples of these differences are given below.

As I have explained, AE is really a continuum of dialects. Certain features are distributed very widely through all dialects, while other features are localised within certain regions, or somewhere along the continuum from heavy to light varieties. In the examples which follow, the symbol **(H)** indicates that the feature is usually found only in heavy AE, whereas the unlabelled features are widely found in AE varieties around the country.

Interested readers are referred to Malcolm and Kaldor (1991) for information about the distribution of AE features.

Phonology (accent and pronunciation)

Many varieties of AE have no *h* sound at the beginning of the word.

AE *'Enry's 'at.* SE *Henry's hat.*

This feature is largely the result of the influence of traditional Aboriginal languages which have no *h* sound. Over the generations, Aboriginal speakers have learnt English with an Aboriginal accent. So when they have learnt SE words which start with an *h* sound, the Aboriginal accent has produced them without it. It's likely that this pronunciation was also influenced by the accent of many of the early non-Aboriginal Australians (especially Cockney and Irish convicts), and it coincides with some other non-standard varieties of English. Thus it is a mistake for teachers to assume that the pronunciation of words without *h* is just uneducated English. It is as much a part of the Aboriginal accent as the 'cute' vowel pronunciations of French speakers of English are part of the French accent, and it should be recognised and respected as a feature of which many Aboriginal people are proud. However, it can cause misunderstanding, as in the example below:

AE *'Elen* SE *Helen* different from *Ellen*

(H) Aboriginal languages rarely have *f, v* or *th* sounds, and so the heavier varieties of AE often change these sounds in English words to other consonants. The most common changes are these:

AE	SE equivalent
p or *b*	*f*
b or *p*	*v*
t or *d*	*th*

This feature can sometimes cause misunderstanding, as in the following example:

AE *We 'ad a bight.* SE *We had a fight.*
different from SE *We had a bite.*

Morpho-syntax (grammar)

To express possession, many varieties of AE simply juxtapose the possessor and the possessed. By contrast, to express possession in SE the possessor noun receives the suffix *-s*.

AE	SE
I can't see that man car.	*I can't see the [or that] man's car.*
Where Tom house?	*Where is Tom's house?*

Note that this grammatical construction parallels the expression of possession in Aboriginal traditional languages. It's also worth noting that these languages rarely have an *s* sound. It would be inaccurate to describe this feature of AE in terms of speakers 'dropping off the SE possessive *-s* suffix'.

(H) In the heavy varieties of AE, *he* (or *'e*) is used to mean either *he* or *she*. This feature can cause misunderstanding, as in the following example:

AE	SE equivalents
'E come from Perth.	*He comes from Perth.*
	She comes from Perth.

But of course the context often prevents such misunderstanding, as in the following example:

Q. *Your mother lives where?*
A. *Before up in Cairns, now 'e down Brisbane.*

Lexico-semantics (words and their meaning)

In the area of lexicon or vocabulary there is often specific regional variation. So, for example, the word for policeman in parts of NSW and Queensland is *buliman*, in other parts of NSW it is *gandjibal* (sometimes spelt *gunjibul*), in Perth it is *monartch*, in Geraldton it is *mardanyuwa*, and so on. All around the country, this is one of the words which remain current the longest, well after almost all of the Aboriginal language of the area has died.

Mardanyuwa means 'person with chains'. *Buliman* and *gandjibal* were originally borrowed from English *policeman* and *constable* respectively and incorporated into Aboriginal languages. Thus they have come into AE as Aboriginal words with an English history.

There are also some English words used with different meanings in AE. For example, the SE word *mother* means 'the woman who gave birth to a person, or her equivalent'. But in many varieties of AE the word *mother* means 'the woman who gave birth to a person, and that woman's sisters'. This shows a continuity from the kinship organisation of traditionally oriented societies, where a mother's sister is often treated as a mother, and a single word would translate into SE both as 'mother' and 'mother's sister'.

Some other examples are:

AE	SE equivalent
country	*land*
growl	*scold*
lingo	*Aboriginal language*
grow [a child] up	*raise [a child]*
camp	*home*
charge	*alcohol*

An interesting lexico-semantic feature of AE is the word *deadly*, which would translate into SE as something like 'really good'. It appears that this is a word which is spreading from AE into general Australian teenage slang.

Pragmatics (the way that language is used in socio-cultural contexts)

The area of pragmatics is where we frequently see the most persistent features of AE. In metropolitan and urban areas particularly, Aboriginal speakers often use linguistic forms which are very close to, or even identical with, SE. However, there are significant aspects of meaning which are not shared with speakers of SE because of socio-cultural differences — in other words, the same utterance may have different meanings in AE and SE because of these differences. For similar reasons Aboriginal speakers may use English in different ways.

A good example of the pragmatics of AE can be seen in the way that people find out information. AE speakers use direct questions to seek certain information, such as clarification of reasonably public details about a person (e.g. *Where 'e from?*). But in situations where Aboriginal people want to find out more substantial or personal information, they typically do not use direct questions. It is important for Aboriginal people not to embarrass others by putting them 'on the spot'. So they volunteer some of their own information, hinting at what they are trying to find out. Information is sought as part of a two-way exchange. Being silent, and waiting until others are ready to share their knowledge, are also central to Aboriginal ways of seeking any substantial information.

Although people in mainstream Australian society can recognise these ways of seeking information, they use them only in sensitive situations. But in Aboriginal interactions they are the everyday strategies for seeking substantial information — they are part of the socio-cultural context. Aboriginal societies in Australia are based on small-scale interaction between people who know each other and are often related to each other. Information is sought as part of an exchange between people who are in a reciprocal, on-going relationship. None the less information or knowledge is often not freely accessible; certain people have rights to certain knowledge.

By contrast, mainstream Australian society is a large-scale society where information is highly valued and much information and knowledge is assumed to be freely accessible. There is also a deep-rooted assumption that if a person needs to find something out, then direct questions are appropriate and effective. The direct question is central to communication in most mainstream Australian institutions, including education, the media and the law. In fact we have 'institutionalised' the question in our interviews, enquiry counters and questionnaires.

Furthermore, direct questioning is so central to western notions of how to teach children that parents and other care givers often communicate with babies, long before they can talk, by asking questions and then answering them on the baby's behalf. For example:

Who's that? Daddy.
Where's Mummy? Gone to work.
Why are you crying? Oh, you're hungry!

However, this conversational pattern doesn't appear to be characteristic of interaction between Aboriginal people and their babies. Much of their interaction is physical, and the question-answer format is not central to verbal interaction. It is much more important to teach Aboriginal babies who their relatives are by telling them things like:

This your auntie.
That your cousin brother. (= SE *father's brother's son*)

Thus there are significant differences in the way English is used within Aboriginal and mainstream societies in Australia, and they can cause serious misunderstandings, of which teachers are often unaware. To take one further example, silence in AE conversations is frequently a sign of comfortable interaction and is not interpreted as a breakdown in communication. Aboriginal people like to use silence while they develop their relationship with another person, or simply while they think about what they are going to say. However, in the mainstream use of English in Australia (as in many western countries), silence in a conversation is an indication that something is going wrong. People try to avoid silences, and, if one develops, there are

efforts to fill it. So, even though silence has the same linguistic form (or sounds the same) in both AE and SE, it does not have the same meaning.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

Aboriginal children all over Australia come to school as fluent and competent communicators. Many of them speak a variety of AE, which we have seen is quite like SE in many respects, as well as being quite like some other varieties of (non-standard) English. But AE differs from these other varieties of English in its expression of Aboriginality in many different ways, including accent, grammar, vocabulary and language use. It is a totally adequate tool of communication, which expresses and maintains Aboriginal identity. While some Aboriginal children will also have developed some bidialectal and bicultural skills, for others their entry to school will present them with the first situation in which they have this need or opportunity.

Most Aboriginal children also come to school with a good knowledge of a wide range of relatives, and of how to behave with them and what to call them. They have learnt that respectful behaviour often requires indirectness and that this includes the polite and comfortable use of silence in many situations.

Teachers who are unaware of Aboriginal ways of using English often wrongly stereotype Aboriginal children's language use as 'bad English', in need of remediation. Moreover they are often ignorant of the conversational and storytelling skills which these children have developed in their home environment. A monocultural classroom will fail to provide the opportunity for many Aboriginal children to use and develop their language skills. For example, they often find themselves excluded by mainstream assumptions about the use of silence and appropriate ways of finding things out.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM

When they start school, Aboriginal children have to learn to interact in the dominant question-answer pattern, which we have seen to be much more direct than the patterns they are generally used to. They are also quite likely to find that the silence which is used frequently and positively in Aboriginal conversations is interrupted by teachers, who misinterpret it as a sign that the children are ignorant, shy or unwilling to cooperate. We need to understand that the Aboriginal response to a question will often start with silence, not because of ignorance, but because this is the Aboriginal way of communicating.

Another important cultural difference concerns eye contact. In many Aboriginal societies it is considered quite rude to look another person in the eye, especially if that person is older, whereas in mainstream society direct eye contact is usually taken as a sign of respect and honesty.

Further discussion of the pragmatic features of AE can be found in Eades (1992). This handbook was written specifically for lawyers, but many of its practical suggestions for more effective communication with Aboriginal people may also be useful to teachers. Another helpful reference is an excellent article by Malcolm (1982).

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

It is only since the 1960s that AE has been recognised by linguists and some educators as a valid, rule-governed variety of English which differs significantly from SE in a number of ways. There is still a widespread lack of acceptance of AE, often based on ignorance. In areas where AE does not sound very different from SE, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speakers are often unaware of the subtle but crucial differences between the two dialects. But though people tend to think that there is no real difference between AE and non-standard English, we have already seen that the pragmatic differences are often crucial to communication.

Education systems in Australia still have a long way to go in recognising the home language of Aboriginal children and accommodating the special needs of Aboriginal speakers of English. Few would deny that these children have the right to learn SE, which is after all a prerequisite for equal participation in areas such as employment and further education. Yet AE-speaking children should also have the right to education in their own dialect, and to learn SE as a second dialect.

However, the development of bidialectal programs, which teach SE to speakers of AE, is far from adequate (Malcolm 1992). Moreover the training of teachers to recognise both AE and the needs of its speakers has hardly begun. Aboriginal children are still being wrongly classified as 'slow learners', in large part because of their different ways of communicating, and in particular because of their different ways of responding to teachers' questions.

In Australia, we could take warning from a situation which developed in the United States from a similar issue. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, Black parents at an elementary school in a low-income housing area took the School District Board to court in 1979 in a landmark case. The parents alleged that the School Board had failed to recognise the language difficulties faced by their children and had failed to educate them accordingly. The children were all speakers of the Black American dialect of English (known as Black English Vernacular, BEV, or, more recently, Afro-American English), which, like AE, is a significantly different dialect of English. The children, who were achieving very poorly at school, were classified as 'learning disabled' or in need of speech therapy. The parents' case depended on establishing that BEV was sufficiently different from SE to constitute a barrier to learning. With the help of linguists, they were successful in showing that it was. The judge ordered that the School District must recognise BEV, must develop a program to help teachers to recognise it, and must offer teachers methods of using that knowledge in teaching Black children SE (Chambers 1983). The implications of this American case are surely significant for teachers of AE-speaking students in Australia.

THE CREOLE LANGUAGES

While this PEN has been mainly concerned with the kinds of English spoken by Aboriginal people around Australia, it should also include a brief account of two new Australian languages which are related to English but are *not* dialects of English.

Kriol is spoken widely in northern Australia, in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, and in the Barkly Tableland region of the Northern Territory. It also extends into the Gulf of Carpentaria region of Queensland. It developed at the beginning of this century and is estimated to have at least 15,000 speakers (Schmidt 1990). Like AE, it developed out of the early pidgin English, but, unlike AE, it is a separate language from English and is often not understandable to speakers of SE.

Another creole language is spoken by up to 15,000 people throughout the Torres Strait Islands and by Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland (Shnukal 1988). This language is called Torres Strait Creole or Broken, and sometimes Blaikman Tok or Big Thap. Its history is complex and involves Melanesian Pidgin English, spoken in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Like Kriol, it is a separate language from English and is often not understandable to speakers of SE. However, many speakers of Kriol and Torres Strait Creole also speak some variety of AE in communicating with non-Aboriginal people.

If you teach speakers of either of these two languages who are not also competent in SE, then you really need an ESL program for them — don't make the mistake of thinking that they are speaking 'some kind of English'. Teachers of Kriol speakers in Western Australia are currently being trained to recognise the language, its major differences from English and the needs of its speakers through an in-service program called FELIKS (Fostering English Language in Kimberley Schools) (Hudson 1992).

CONCLUSION

The home language of very many Aboriginal children throughout Australia is some kind of Aboriginal English. It is not 'bad English' or 'pidgin English' and it is in no way inferior to Standard English. Children who speak AE are fluent, articulate and creative users of language, just like children who speak SE. Furthermore, although the differences between AE and SE may not seem great in many areas, there are subtle differences, especially in the way that language is used, which are important to the identity of Aboriginal children. Respecting, valuing and understanding Aboriginal ways of using English is a significant step in respecting, valuing and understanding the identity and self-esteem of these children.

Another important step is the delivery of effective bidialectal education which starts from the children's home language (AE) and teaches them to be competent users of SE in appropriate situations. Such English teaching aims not to correct or replace the children's AE, but to show them how it differs from SE and teach them fluency in mainstream uses of SE.

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